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A Detailed Case Study of Unusual Routines

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5 | *A detailed case study of unusual routines*

This chapter and Chapter 6 describe how each of the five propositions played out in a lengthy field study at an educational institution (Cooper, 2000), based upon our working model of unusual routines introduced in the preceding chapter. While the initial intent was to focus on the effects the implementation of a computer-mediated communication system (one kind of ICT) might have on URs, the early data collection suggested that the study would provide broader insights into UR dynamics in decision processes and operations. The study utilized depth interviews with a stratified purposive sample of organization members, and such qualitative methodology often does lead to pleasant surprises in the knowledge the study generates. That is to say, the study convinced us that the model had broader application than to ICTs alone, and had particular analytical value in understanding the relationship between problematic routine behaviors and organizational culture. It is important to emphasize that in no way was this intended as an assessment or critique of communication at the site! Indeed, we expect that the URs and interaction scripts surfaced in the study may be all too familiar to our colleagues at other institutions.

Method

The research site

At the time of the study, the organization had just begun a major end user computing initiative to implement a shared database of student records, and to provide email to all faculty and staff. Up to that point, college records had been maintained on a mainframe computer by an information technology (IT) department. To obtain needed information from these records, administrative units requested a report from the IT unit. A common complaint was that these reports were

out-of-date by the time they are received, particularly budget figures. (See Gasser, 1986, pp. 213–14 for similar examples of *computer slip*.) Units frequently devised their own recordkeeping systems as a work-around to the centralized IT function, and with most workarounds, these systems were unique to each department. There had been no way to share this locally-generated information across units, other than printouts or telephone inquiries.

Inclusive decision-making was an important organizational value for the university, and was clearly evident in most initiatives. Some issues spawned task forces or study groups, most often at the college president's directive. The membership of these ad hoc work groups was carefully chosen to broadly represent various constituencies with an interest in the issue. Other issues were considered in an elaborate college governance system which had been in place for more than a decade at the time of the study. All constituencies on the campus were represented on a number of standing committees, and all organization members had voting rights in the general meetings. The charter of this permanent body specified that its decisions were advisory to the president and board of trustees and therefore not binding, and there was some disagreement about how much weight the governance body's decisions actually carried with the executives.

In all these decision processes document sharing, document editing, or other group work tended to be paper- and face-to-face meeting-intensive. In short, there was a great deal of collaborative work being done, but without much use of electronic communications to facilitate it.

Data collection

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the data collection employed semi-structured interviews with organization members. These interviews asked the informants about their personal use of computer-mediated communication (hereafter referred to as ICT), their department's use of ICT, about aspects of their daily activities which they perceived as frustrating or negatively impacting their job performance, and about organizational values which the informants saw as affecting decision processes.

The second author had worked in higher education for a number of years and had often been involved in group decision-making and

the writing of policy documents. Over time, he had formed personal impressions of interaction patterns which often appeared in those collaborative activities, yet struck him as problematic in their effects on the decision process. These suggested to him five categories of interaction scripts (digressing, trivializing, reframing, scapegoating, and expanding; related to some of Bardach's (1977) implementation games) which might be associated with URs, and were used as prompts in the interview. He read the brief descriptions and asked the informants if they were reminded of group decision processes in which they had participated. The names of the scripts, in italic typeface, were solely for the interviewer's convenience in taking notes and were not read to the informants! Table 5.1 provides the interview guide.

Table 5.1 *Interview guide*

Involved in the [ICT] implementation?

If so, describe involvement.

Do you use email, or any other kind of computerized communication?

Does the XYZ Department use email, or any other kind of computerized communication?

Recognize any scripts? (Any context at the college, group or interpersonal.)

Digressing:

"Nostalgia" – Consideration of a problem is sidetracked by reminiscences of times when the problem was non-existent or less pressing, or speculation how a former leader would have handled it.

Trivializing:

"I Have a Concern" – A minor objection or concern (in comparison to the potential benefit of the proposal under consideration) stops further consideration of a particular course of action. Put another way, a small objection blocks a promising idea.

"The Microscope" – Discussion narrows to a small detail or aspect of the question. Time is used up in consideration of minutiae, rather than the central problem.

"Every Proposal is Wrong" – An objection or concern (sometimes trivial) is attached to each of a number of proposals under consideration. No proposal is decisively eliminated, and none gains a consensus.

Table 5.1 (cont.)

 Reframing:

“*The Larger Issue*” – The question at hand becomes tied to another, broader issue, and discussion gravitates toward that issue.

“*Change the Agenda*” – The issue is reframed so that the discussion moves away from the initial question.

Scapegoating:

“*Kick the Dog*” – A weak consensus builds around problem definition, but not around a concrete solution or course of action. Blame is placed on a person or department not present at the meeting and over whom the group has no control.

“*Piling On*” – Problems are attributed to a person or department which has already received criticism regarding another issue.

Expanding:

“*We Haven’t Heard All the Voices*” – An actor objects that some party was not adequately consulted or advised about the issue. The legitimacy of the group process is undermined.

“*Nobody Asked Me*” – An actor objects that he or she was not adequately consulted or advised about the issue. The legitimacy of the group process is undermined.

“*Everybody’s a Winner*” – Disagreements over problem and/or course of action are resolved by inserting every party’s language in document.

Can you think of other patterns, in discussions at the college?

Can you think of things that happen at the college that are negative, counterproductive or dysfunctional in some way, yet continue to happen repeatedly?

Are there any core beliefs or values at the college which interfere with discussion or collective decision-making? (at any level: college-wide, departmental, small group)

Can you think of times when someone’s words seemed inconsistent with what you thought they really intended?

Sampling

Informants were selected to represent the major academic divisions of the college and levels in the administrative structure. The intent was to obtain a purposive, stratified sample (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 27ff.) of the organization members across the subunits,

based on the supposition that position within the organization might affect the informant's experience both with URs and with the system implementation. When the interviews within these strata revealed critical events or key players, snowball sampling was used to obtain data from the individuals directly involved in the ICT implementation, or individuals who seemed to play some key role in a UR.

The organizational chart suggested three major functional strata to be sampled, each containing a number of defined subunits: administration, faculty, and operations. There was a good degree of embedded complexity since each functional stratum contained members of different union bargaining units, and because subunits within a particular stratum varied considerably from each other in the degree to which they had adopted the new system at the time of the study.

Analytical method

In the early stages of the data collection, it became apparent that there often were sharp differences in the informants' perspectives on the interaction patterns we call URs. For instance, some informants saw the elaborate group decision processes as problematic, both in the large amounts of time and effort required to come to closure and in the perceived quality of the decisions emerging from them. Other informants, by contrast, felt that although such deliberations might become tedious they were vital to maximize the inclusiveness of the group. At first glance the perspective difference seemed to be between administrators and faculty – a group conflict endemic to academic institutions! – but as the data collection went on it appeared more as individual differences in orientation toward the product of the interaction (i.e., the decision), or toward the process (i.e., the deliberations) – in other words, between the content and the relational dimensions of interactions.

As is the case in much qualitative research, the analysis in large measure emerged from the interview data. Coding the interviews for references to URs, subroutines, and indicators helped to reveal their dimensions and dynamics. The details of the coding are omitted here for the sake of brevity. Space limitations likewise prevent a detailed exploration of the interviews, but the balance of this chapter is intended to give the reader a sense of how indicators of URs and their subroutines surfaced in them.

Proposition One

If a new ICT mitigates or exacerbates URs it does so not simply as a more efficient channel (the first-level effect) but also as an innovation the organization must process (the second-level effect).

The system as just a new computer: the first-level effects

Many informants expected the new ICT to produce first-level changes in such procedures as distributing class rosters to faculty and reporting grades to the registrar, but anticipated little impact on the organization beyond that. A senior faculty member and department chair, expected the email capability to make little difference in his/her sub-unit's operations.

Int: Does anybody in your department use email?

I really don't know. I know none of us have access to it on our own computers [i.e., at work], so if they use it they use it at home.

Int: Are there any plans that you know of?

Yes. We got new computers in the summer and we're wired or almost wired, and they tell us we'll get it shortly.

Int: Do you have any thoughts on what you personally or the department as a group might do with email?

I don't see any great advantage to email. I think we probably could talk with publishers, book reps, other faculty in other colleges, set up meetings and conferences. I don't see internally – I don't know, maybe because we don't have it, you know, we haven't gotten to use it, but – um, you know, we're so close to each other, I mean, I don't see where email is any great benefit to improve our communication.

More than just a new computer system: second-level effects on the social system

Some informants did see the ICT implementation as at least an opportunity for, if not a catalyst of, second-level changes in the social order of the organization. An interesting example of such changes in the interactions among organization members surfaced in the interview with an upper-level administrator who had been heavily involved in the planning of the new system and had already noticed second-level change beginning in the social interactions.

The first stage of the system implementation consisted of adapting a commercial software product, marketed to higher education institutions in general, to this specific institution. To this end, the college began a wide-ranging effort to solicit input from organization members at all levels about both their existing work methods and new functionality they might want the system to deliver. It became the task of the project team to fit the practices and preferences of the organization into the capabilities of the software. In a sense, the new computer system was simultaneously a template which could to a limited extent be adapted to the existing social system, and a force in itself which pressured the social system to change in particular directions. (This is a bit stronger than Barley's (1986) observation that technology implementations are *occasions* in which restructuring *can* take place, and a common analysis of ICT implementation by socio-technical practitioners and researchers.) This informant saw the implementation as actually compelling the social system to change, and seemed to intuitively recognize this structural dimension of the implementation work: the committee was tasked with optimizing the functionality of the ICT, and simply took it as a given that there would be changes in the social system as a result.

We have not gotten into discussions of, "well – this is going to cause a change in this group's job description; we need to talk to Human Resources." We're not interested in doing that. That's not the point of this. That's Human Resources' problem; they need to deal with the way the jobs change after the jobs have changed. So we're not changing people's jobs ... we're simply saying, "this is the system."

Beyond the expectation of long-term second order effects, this informant also noticed immediate changes in the interaction patterns among organization members. The implementation work brought together people from different functional units which had tended to be only loosely coupled, an effect also noted in Aydin and Rice's study of a university healthcare unit (1992).

First, this has been the most startling, wonderful kind of experience. We had a group of people sitting around a table who had never sat around a table before ... really didn't know each others' functions ... The human resources, payroll, and the finance people really thought of themselves as a

unit unto themselves and were surprised by the input they got from people who were on those implementation teams who came from educational services, because they thought they knew everything about it. So that was another big change.

Besides simply bringing about face-to-face interactions among people from different units, the design work also required that certain issues be settled expeditiously and that the solutions be uniform across the institution. Although the selection of codes, field names, and symbols in a database might seem a relatively trivial technical detail in a system implementation, it generated a surprising amount of controversy in that the need for uniformity forced a tighter degree of subunit coupling than had been typical at this institution (as also found by Aydin and Rice, 1992). The effort spent in resolving such questions is an indicator of the degree to which such tight coupling went against the grain of culture.

[B]ut that [conflict over codes for departments] was another one that was a lengthy discussion, and part of it is just understanding that in an integrated system you can't just not take into account what's going to happen within the other departments and the other areas of the college.

...

[T]he jurisdiction over a code is a very important thing but there has to be an agreement to maintain it, and so all of those discussions which are things that they tried to have us do with regard to the mainframe, but it was always fragmented, and this has brought about a real communication amongst the people, and we're not fragmented half as much as we were.

From an administrator of a unit that had already implemented the ICT, there were also some early indications of changes in the norms for communicative behaviors, such as increased responsiveness to messages, follow-up to meetings, density of communication interactions, and awareness of external information resources.

An interesting example of a blame subroutine surfaced in the interview with a member of the information technologies group. This informant's duties included performing maintenance and set-up work on desktop computers. S/he had, in the past, often received criticism from end users that the department had failed to perform the work the client had requested, criticism the informant viewed as sometimes

unwarranted or even unethical. With the email function of the ICT becoming available at the college, this informant began using email to document the maintenance requests, which was a noticeable change from the informality with which much interdepartmental communication had been handled in the past (also noted in Romm's studies of political uses of computer-mediated communication systems, 1998).

Int: What use does your department make of email for business?

Business? ... I use it as a great defense mechanism.

Int: Defense?

I get it in black and white. I get my ass chewed off a lot around here because of lying. Users tell me that they want one thing, we go and do it, and they say that's not what they want. And so I make a lot of things come in black and white now.

Int: You mean, requests for your assistance or your services?

Yeah. Requests for certain modifications, systems to be redone, things of that nature. So I use it as a defense system. I get it in black and white, and certain people don't like to do that in black and white. I've been bitten in the ass a lot of times, and I've learned from it, and so I use it for that. I use it when I want to get my point across, and I want it out in black and white.

In this informant's view, one dimension of the problem was that there were often simple misunderstandings between end users and computer support personnel about the details of such technical work, fostering delay or error subroutines. Beyond that, however, the informant felt there were times when clients falsely accused his/her department of incompetent work, interactions characteristic of blame subroutines.

Int: So your experience was – you used the word, blame. I'm getting the sense that you would do what people said.

Yes.

Int: And then they would accuse you, or blame you, or fault you.

Yes.

Int: For it not turning out the way they liked, later on.

Yes. Exactly. Saying, "This isn't what I really meant," or "This isn't what I told you." And that's when it comes to the point where it's actually a lie, in my book. So I use it a lot for that.

The system as a catalyst for policy change: a major second-level effect

Some informants saw a relationship between the ICT implementation and policy changes occurring at this time. The change in the college's grading policy is the most dramatic example of such second-level change the informants attributed, at least in part, to the new computer system.

For several decades the college had used a somewhat non-traditional system of reporting course grades and calculating students' cumulative averages. The grading system had been controversial for some years prior to the ICT implementation, with many philosophical and practical objections to the existing system, yet proposals to adopt traditional grading had repeatedly been voted down in the college governance forum and the grading system had remained unchanged. About six months into the deployment of the new system, the college president made a speech to the college community to announce that because the state had altered its funding formula in such a way that the nonstandard grading system would significantly disadvantage the college, the board of trustees had made an executive decision to change to a traditional grading system. The president was forming a special commission to draft the specific policy for that system, which then would be presented for discussion in the governance forum.

There were several striking differences from the earlier initiatives to change the grading system. The impetus for the change was an event in the organization's environment, while earlier debates had arisen internally, driven by some parties' dissatisfaction with the old grading system. The decision to change had been made at the executive level by the board of trustees, rather than proposed in the collegial governance system and voted on in that body. The commission charged with drafting the language of the new grade policy had an expeditious timetable in which to complete its work, in contrast to the open-ended discussions and committee work characteristic of the earlier proposals in the college governance.

Int: I want to make sure I understand. At Governance Day you watched a videotape of the college president, and the college president said the grading system is going to change, by such-and-such a date, I guess?

Got to. He said, these are reasons why it has to change, and we've got to start talking about it and got to start making decisions about what we want to do.

Int: And the reason why is ...?

There's a couple reasons. One is [the new ICT] ... [I]t would be very difficult for [the new ICT] to adjust to our [current] grading system. Another is – if I can recall now – the state has some performance-based budgeting, and so the way they measure performance is based upon grades.

The rapidity of the change and its general acceptance by the college community was striking, given the previous resistance of the old system to change. As this quote illustrates, a number of informants felt that while the state funding formula made adoption of a traditional grading system inevitable, the ICT implementation was at least a catalyst in this major change.

Much more than just a new computer system: second-level effects on value chains

Although a bit unorthodox, it can be useful to think of sequences of operations in an academic institution as value chains. Students often must make their way through a sequence of procedures within their academic institution as they matriculate, register for classes, or qualify for graduation. Typically these procedural steps require contact with a number of different subunits within the school. As noted above, these subunits may be quite loosely coupled with the result that costs are externalized on the students in the form of work, delay, or error subroutines. (Or, if – sadly – the result is a deficiency in the student's academic performance, the cost may be externalized on his or her later employer or graduate school.)

The head of a large academic service unit expected the new ICT to change the procedural steps of the value chain including his/her unit. At the time of the interview, the unit sent students out to a specialized department for testing of their reading and computational skills, but s/he anticipated the ICT would make it possible to perform this testing within the unit. On the surface this may seem to be a simple first-level gain in efficiency, yet this informant intuitively recognized the potential for second-level change as the system altered the control

over and availability of this, and other, procedures, effectively altering subunit boundaries in the process.

[A]ll of a sudden as things come on line, newer people and people across the organization laterally are going to have the capacity to do things that were more restricted to one or another office, so we might deliver the testing right in our own office for example, rather than sending [the students] to the testing office.

Another informant who worked on the design of the human resources and payroll functions of the new system also observed how the new system was the catalyst for changes in subunit boundaries, such as greater decentralization, a potential threat to some departments, such as administrative services, which had controlled access to financial information. This suggests that a general organizational inertia may be an accumulation of subunit-level change resistance.

A high-level administrator, not directly involved with the implementation, made a very interesting link between the distribution of power in the organization and the distribution of knowledge.

The technological systems that we talked about earlier, that will make some things less secret, that information will really be public and shared, rather than held and controlled as power by people on lower levels, sometimes, of the organization. All of those things, I think, will help. I think the technology, the good budget, the pattern and participatory bargaining, a very clear performance evaluation system that's viewed positively, that rewards initiative and performance. All of those things would help.

It is quite interesting to note that s/he envisioned new flows of information *upward* with the implementation of the new ICT, and looked forward to a broader sharing of information replacing the current proprietary, localized control over information. Typically, organizational studies presume or conclude that power is concentrated in the upper levels of the organization (see Morgan, 1986, pp. 280 ff.). While there may be some basis for that generalization, it is worth noting that when certain knowledge is confined to the "shop floor," certain kinds of organizational power are likely to be vested there, also. This quote from a practicing executive in an educational institution reminds us that it is often more accurate to say that (at least some) power is concentrated where the knowledge is concentrated, and not necessarily where the organizational chart suggests authority lies.

Another administrator hoped for double-loop learning occasioned by the new ICT. This informant viewed the practice of holding meetings as a work subroutine:

Well, I think there's just too much time spent in a given week, sitting in meetings in this room or the trustees' dining room, or wherever, when the only reason you're meeting is because it was on the schedule. I mean, essentially what you get at the meeting you could have gotten in your email. And because of people who aren't there, you don't know what they think about it. And if they could respond to the group through email, then everybody would have everybody else's reactions.

I'm not saying do away with meetings, but I'm just saying that I think we need to look seriously at how to make better use of all this networking we've done. I mean, what did we spend? How many millions of dollars on a fiber optic network and an email system, a computer on every desk? It's not that I just want to sit at my desk and do email all day, I don't mean that either. But I think that we should use that facility to inform us.

I mean, every once in a while this phrase, the "learning organization," comes up. And I think that's the first step to being a learning organization: learning how to use information technology to get the information you need to learn. And I don't think we're doing that well enough. I think we've got the physical infrastructure in place ...

Int: Why is it, do you think, that we're not doing that if the plumbing, the infrastructure is in place?

We're too busy going to meetings.

Proposition Two

Loose coupling between subunits in a value chain allows URs to resist change.

The difficulty of managing a loosely coupled structure

One problem administrators face in an academic organization is that of matching resources to needs. A particularly difficult boundary management (Johnson and Rice, 1987, pp. 165 ff.) problem involves obtaining or allocating resources *outside* the administrator's span of control which are necessary to managing activity *within* his or her responsibilities. Two dimensions of special interest here include (a) the way subunits can interact as if loosely coupled when their

functionality is highly interdependent, and (b) the ways institutional values and politics can preserve URs.

An administrator who worked in the enrollment and registration unit described an example of this kind of problem. His/her unit generated enrollment data as classes filled up, and s/he was hence in a good position to assess the fit of resources (in this case, open sections) to demand (in this case, students wishing to register for classes). The decision to open new sections where there was unfilled demand, however, was made elsewhere in the organization.

We send regular reports to all of the division chairs, division administrators, and department chairs, tracking what level of activity there's been in their class[es]. We send it on two different levels ... [Redacted], from recruitment services, will do a daily enrollment report which will track, in essence, program by program. So for people who are on top of this – and some are and some aren't – they'll look at this very closely ... We open new sections, potentially.

Int: When you say, "we," who's the we?

Um ... it would ultimately be the division that would initiate it, but we would be the ones that would spur that, feed them the information that they need to do that ...

Int: Your unit generates the intelligence about where there's the greatest demand and where there's slack demand, and where you need more resources, in this case meaning more open sections.

Exactly.

Int: You yourself don't create new sections.

Correct.

Int: But you send the information that there's a potential need or a potential surplus over to the division, which means to the academic side. They actually make the decision.

Correct.

Int: You don't have direct control over that.

No. We don't.

It is not problematic in itself that this informant's unit identified undersupplied courses but could not generate more sections; resources are always insufficient in (especially public) universities. Also, certainly this information could, in principle, stimulate an appropriate

response in another subunit within the organization. However, this was not always the case, even when the mismatch between demand and supply was chronic for certain courses required for students to graduate. What does seem problematic at the conceptual level is that the subunit which created the supply/demand intelligence and the subunit which opened new sections were so loosely coupled. That the mismatch was a systemic and even regular occurrence, and not an exceptional situation, indicates this is a UR.

[Redacted] generates reports on a section by section basis, so people can track ... each individual section and know from that, basically, when they may need to open new sections ... [T]hat's the intelligence that they need to determine what they should be offering next year. They should be looking at how quickly are these filling up, are we forcing people into extension centers because there's no more on-campus sections. I look at those also, in what have traditionally been problem areas and gatekeeper areas.

And, again, to give you an example of what this dilemma is, we've had an ongoing issue over English 121. It's probably the most illustrative one I can give you. English 121 is what we call a gateway class. Basically, everyone's got to take that. We've had a real problem over the years monitoring the number of sections of English 121 – and there's like sixty, seventy sections that we offer – and having enough for our students to get in.

Int: You usually don't have enough sections?

We generally run out ... We run into logistics issues, we run into political issues – and they're significant.

Int: Political?

Well, we've had some very, very serious ongoing debates ... in terms of holding off because they were looking to increase the number of full-time permanent faculty. And we were saying, "hire adjuncts," and they were saying, "we can't get enough competent, qualified adjuncts to do those sections."

Int: Let's see if I understand you specifically. They did not want to put more adjuncts in the stable or on call, because they felt that would undercut their stated need for full-time positions.

Correct. Correct.

Such a UR externalizes its cost onto third parties (in this case, students who cannot obtain the courses they want), and can be quite resistant to change.

Loose coupling and change resistance

Informants whose jobs involved transaction processing often voiced frustration with routine procedures that were problematic for them, yet resisted their best efforts to change them. An informant who worked in the registrar's office described a longstanding difficulty s/he experienced with late registration of international students. A few points are worth noting in this passage. First, the costs of this UR were externalized onto the students in the form of a error subroutine involving their registration and financial aid. Second, despite personnel changes and repeated efforts to resolve it, the problem persisted. Third, the informant, in non-technical language, attributed the problem to loose coupling between the subunits involved in this process.

Int: You indicated that there's some difficulty with the international studies students.

Yup. We swear that there's a virus in the files ... It makes no difference who is in charge at international studies. They just can't give us what we ask them. And it's just an oddity, I have no idea what it is. It's not that hard. We're very clear. We've been writing down what we need and when we need it, and it's really the timeliness that's the problem. We should not have students going abroad who haven't registered yet, and that happens ...

Int: Now, the management has changed a couple times ...

That's what I'm saying! That's why I say it has to be in the files. It's not the people [laughs].

Int: Have you checked the water cooler? [laughs]

[laughs] It's a very odd situation, very odd. And the thing that happens is that if a student has not registered and has not been formally accepted into the program they don't qualify for financial aid which in the case of international students comprises loans. And without those loans most of the students cannot afford to be in a foreign country. And so there's all of this last-minute stuff that is really mean to the students

...

The fact is that financial aid is in a tizzy, because now they're here [the students], they want their loan papers approved, and they've [financial aid] never seen them before. So there's all of this stuff that is just done so poorly

...

And that one is just a puzzle, and it truly is as if there's something in the animal of international studies that just doesn't allow itself to see itself as part of the institution.

Another administrator saw loose coupling creating coordination problems across the entire organization:

Well, it would be a lot easier if people who worked here knew what other people did. And I think that's a big part of the problem. Accounting really doesn't know what goes on in the division office. Receiving really is not aware of what goes on in a division office. I'm really not aware of what goes on in community development.

If we had an understanding of what the other areas did maybe we would be more cooperative, because there's a lot of territorialism, there's a lot of, "that's not my job, I'm not going to do it" ... So I think if we understood what the other people did a little better it would make everybody's life a little easier. Payroll wouldn't insist on ridiculous deadlines, accounting wouldn't insist on doing things in a certain way if they knew how it affected us.

These examples illustrate the wide array of change-resistant functional problems which can be related to loose subunit coupling and high levels of subunit autonomy. It is also interesting to note the blame subroutines which had arisen as a consequence of those longstanding problems. While increased communication is often suggested as a palliative for such coordination problems among subunits, it is not always clear exactly what kind of communication would be most valuable or how more of it would alleviate those problems. (Chapter 7 discusses feedback problems in greater depth.)

The system implementation and subunit coupling

An administrator in the IT group provided an interesting example of how the system implementation had begun to precipitate a tightening in subunit coupling. A number of points are worth noting in this passage. The new shared database required a higher degree of coordination among subunits than had been the norm, and activity related to the implementation was bringing some conflicts to the surface. It appears that the mechanism for defusing these conflicts had in the past been a blame subroutine with the blame directed at the mainframe IT

department, which the new system was going to replace with end user computing.

A good example – I know it’s going to come up soon – is, as we go around to different departments and explain what it’s [i.e., the new system] all about and how interaction has to go on between departments, and communications – which just is not there. One department is going to affect another department by what they’re putting into different fields, and how they’re going to cooperate on the database.

Int: That’s because the data is shared, right?

Yes. And I just see how different departments say, “No, this is how we want it. We really don’t care about them.” And vice versa. “No, my department’s more important than that department.” Well, it’s going to be interesting when Big Blue [i.e., the mainframe] gets finally pulled, which is very soon.

Prior to the implementation of the shared database, subunits were for the most part free to choose their own software packages since the electronic data generated within the unit were used only within that unit. The introduction of a shared database prohibited that degree of subunit autonomy, and we can see both the ICT implementation beginning to precipitate a localized tightening in subunit coupling, and a notable resistance to this change rooted in the high degree of subunit autonomy which had been previously been a norm in the organizational culture.

Int: When you anticipate departments fighting or failing to cooperate among themselves, are you talking about academic departments, operations departments?

All of them. For right now we’ll go with operations ... Let me use a specific, because we just went through this. Financial Aid likes their – and I just lost the word for the product they use – Profields, or something like that. Either way, they use a different standard database, but their stuff has to go into the [new ICT], so when their information is in there registration can pull up what they happen to need, and the bookstore can pull up what kind of financial aid they’re getting.

Int: That’s their database?

That’s what they’re using to track their information. And that has to be relayed over to the [ICT] for the rest of the college to use it. It’s like, “Well, no. This works for us, and this is how we want to deal with it.” So, it’s a college issue.

Proposition Three

Visibility alone is insufficient to mitigate unusual routines when they provide localized benefits for a subunit.

How a blame subroutine can camouflage negligence

Certainly the tactic of shifting responsibility for an operational problem is not unique to the culture of this research site (and is a general characteristic of humans – see the discussion of cognitive dissonance and self-attribution bias in Chapter 8). Of interest here is the way the evolution of a blame subroutine can institutionalize a problem and preserve it, even when the problem is chronic and well recognized. An administrator who had worked in the mainframe computer department (which the implementation was replacing with end user computing) described an example of a highly visible, yet chronic, problem. In this informant's eyes, the department unjustly suffered, in the form of a blame subroutine and a work subroutine, when some faculty submitted grades after the deadline.

Grading always had to be in by a certain amount of time. Now, it didn't matter that we didn't get the scan sheets [i.e., the optical scanning form on which faculty reported grades] on time to go put them in. It was O[ffice] I[nformation] T[echnology]'s problem that [student grades] weren't out.

Int: Now, you're saying OIT?

The old OIT, when we were on the mainframe. We used to get scan sheets – there's a perfect example – grading, from faculty. They had to be out by a certain amount of time, the report cards had to be out by a certain amount of time. So, many times we'd schedule – “Hey, we need this in by this date” – and half of them [i.e., the scan sheets] weren't even in.

So we'd go, “Hey, we got two weeks. All right. Let's reschedule that whole run again.” The grading process was a long run. That was a full night run. It was like a five- to six-hour run, with backups and everything else that were being upgraded. So we'd schedule that. Let's run it again.

And of course, half of them didn't give it in, so we had another fifty come in. Boom. Let's run the process. Say, “This is the last week to get it in, because next week we have to do everything.” All right, another twenty-five come in. So that's just an example, but it goes the same with other types of reporting we had to do over there.

Just because the end user didn't have it in on time – it still meant it was OIT's problem.

This informant's department was penalized in two ways by this UR. First, it bore the cost of a work subroutine, in making multiple runs of the term grade job. Worse, it was the target – unjustly, in this informant's view – of a blame subroutine which evolved around this chronic operational problem.

How a delay subroutine can protect a perquisite

Some informants expressed frustration that participants in a group process would sometimes appear to deliberately sidetrack the discussion. The head of a large educational service unit viewed group time spent laboring over the details of a decision as a necessary task, but distinguished this from what s/he saw as tactics designed to stall the decision.

Some people can't focus on the big issue; they get to it by picking at the smaller parts of it. You just have to provide time for that. It's part of the dynamic of the group, whether that's departmental or part of a larger group. Sometimes those details are important.

Int: Have you been at meetings where you felt that time was being wasted over lots of detail?

No, my frustration in meetings is when you've got an agenda, and you think you'll go through these things one, two, three and all of a sudden you swing out to a tangential topic of some kind. And people who don't want to talk about the agenda item use it as a diversion. Somebody raises a hand to get off the topic and somebody else takes it some place else.

That happens and I find that more frustrating than working on details ... [It's] like being inside a pinball machine. I like to have as few and short meetings as possible and you should have some action intended for the meeting, whatever it is you came for and get it done. I go to too many meetings and you think, "What did we do besides sit there for an hour?"

Int: Let me read you a different description [of a hypothetical group dynamic]. "The issue is reframed so discussion turns away from the original issue."

Informer: Yeah, that tends to happen a lot.

Int: Can you give me examples of where you experienced that?

It happens in division chair meetings. It will happen sometimes in governance and committee meetings ... There are times when people come to meetings with alternate agendas.

How “good” decision-making can lead to an error subroutine

Like the grading system, the college’s general education policy had been the subject of controversy for a considerable period of time prior to this study. Perhaps it is in this issue that the product/process distinction briefly mentioned above is most visible. Informants differed sharply in their assessment of this policy and the organizational system which resulted from it. Those favoring it spoke approvingly of the collegial decision process which generated the policy; those critical of it cited its complexity and questioned its educational effectiveness. The general education system had been in place for more than a decade at the time of data collection. A number of the informants had been at the college during the time that the system had been designed and implemented, and thus could reflect both on the system itself as a product and on the process that generated it. At the time of the interviews, the issue of the college’s general education system had come up anew because of the state’s desire to facilitate transferability of credits.

To an informant who became a full-time administrator but had earlier served as faculty, the existing general education system was obviously flawed, despite the support it had enjoyed among faculty. This informant was clear in his/her dissatisfaction with that system, and the process which generated it.

I sat on that original general education committee. That was a very long time ago. That whole general education model was born out of a desire to please everybody, so we ended up with this non-model model, this – you know, you can’t make a horse out of a camel, which is exactly what we tried to do. We limped along with it for years and years and years.

To this informant, a seriously flawed system came out of the attempt to maximize the buy-in of the faculty.

But basically, in the beginning everyone felt their course should be designated [i.e., have the broadest applicability to the general education requirement] because everyone thought their course was important. So we ended up with the designated general education [courses] and the non-designated general education. And the non-designated was simply an effort to give a

positive label to all those people and all those courses that didn't fit into the designated. And nobody – I served on that committee, I felt like I was in the twilight zone – nobody wanted to hear that maybe underwater basket weaving didn't meet general education requirements. They didn't want to hear it. And so this model was created that I don't think served us well over the years. It's not clear in the catalog, students didn't really understand it, transfer institutions didn't really understand it.

In stark contrast, the professor who chaired that committee looked back on that process as successful collective decision-making. To this informant, the major challenge facing the committee was to satisfy the concerns of all parties at the table.

Well, one of the first big leadership experiences I had here was ... with the challenge of creating the college's newest general education policy. It was my job to bring the college into compliance with what was then the [state's] new general education policy ... There were economic concerns, about "what was going to happen to my courses?" There were political concerns, in terms of shifts of enrollments from one place in the college to another place in the college. There were just layers and layers of things that people were worried about when we started to tinker with the general Ed policy of the college.

To this participant, the general education system the group was charged with designing had the potential to significantly disrupt the existing social order of the college, particularly with regard to power and resource allocation. The chief concern of the decision process, therefore, was to satisfy the concerns of all at that table; the process was successful because this was done.

Int: And the concern there was that some departments' enrollments would be drastically diminished.

Right. But nobody's was.

Int: That was a concern.

That was one of the concerns.

Int: Were there others, in arriving at that solution?

Well, yeah. That would have created realignments of power in terms of SCH's [student credit hours] among departments. Then there were the economic questions. If your – if a course in your department didn't get a

certain status in the listing, then you might not need all the faculty you have. I mean, there were real economic concerns.

And then there were the philosophical concerns. What is general education, really? So all of those things – political, economic, philosophical – they were all flying around all the time. And would have to be hammered out on a – almost on a course – not almost: on a course-by-course basis ... We were trying to address all of what we recognized as serious concerns that people brought up to us in the process. So we were trying to respect what was at stake, from many points of view. So, I guess we did.

Despite this informant's favorable assessment of the general education system and the process which generated it, another interviewee expressed considerable frustration with the system itself, and its resistance to change. General education policy fell under the purview of a free-standing committee, apart from the governance structure, and so appeared quite buffered from feedback about its decisions.

Let me give you an example ... [W]e have a system for general education ... very atypical to what might be found at other colleges and universities, and we use terms that are nonsense terms, like non – what is it? – one general education course is called a “designated” general education [course], and there's a “nondesignated” general [education course] – which is a nonsense term. What's that about?

...

And there's all this discussion about general education. And then you have this General Education committee, and it seems to be autonomous. People get on there, some people don't even know how they get on there, but they keep going, and they seem to be dictating how general education happens [here]. And no one seems to be able to do anything about getting that committee changed or influenced. And it's almost an amazing kind of thing, it has a life of its own. And yet, here everybody is always complaining about the general education system that we have, yet no one seems to be able to make that change.

Proposition Four

A UR can resist change because its script affirms an ideological tenet of the organization, or because it glosses a contradiction in organizational values.

Inclusion, collegiality, work subroutines, and delay subroutines

As noted above, it may sometimes happen that inclusion, despite its merits as an organizational value, fosters delay subroutines in decision processes. This suggests another interesting paradox: a larger decision-making group may be a better enactment of some important organizational value, but actually do a poorer job at its task of making a decision. A department chair linked the openness and inclusion values to delay subroutines:

Well, I think when you're in college environment there are people who believe fundamentally in an open environment, and who believe in collegiality as a fundamental precept of the environment that we live in. And so if anything the belief in an open environment, an open discussion, operates against decision-making because ... we want to involve everybody, we want to make sure that nobody's left out, and we want to make sure that everybody has been able to present their point of view. So then decision-making in a college environment is very time-consuming.

Int: Time-consuming?

Yeah. It's just not easy to make decisions in a college environment because of the commitment to openness and discussion and collegiality.

Another senior faculty member commented on the way an emphasis on inclusion can lead to group process losses. Even though at another point in the interview this informant was highly critical of a particular upper-level administrator for moving meetings along too fast and allowing too little time for open discussion, s/he still seemed vexed at the way committee meetings can spend a good deal of time belaboring details.

You see it all the time. Nit picking. How many times do you sit at a meeting that you agree on a concept of something and spend the next hour and a half trying to get it down on paper? People are complaining about should a comma go there, or should an 'n' go there. You have that. Also overanalyzing of things. The demand of being on a committee is to look at all these kind of things and it happens at all levels. I've seen progress come to a halt with only 2-3 people, all the way up, to where small details are blown out of proportion.

Of particular interest here is her/his point that collegiality requires that every comment be given equal consideration in the discussion, even comments that are off-topic or of little value in advancing the discussion. In this way, the rigorous enactment of an organizational value may protect a work or delay subroutine, without any compensating benefit of avoiding an error subroutine. Put another way, the group may suffer the process losses of *information overload* or *coordination problems* without enjoying the process gain of *objective evaluation* (Nunamaker *et al.*, 1991, p. 46). It is reasonable to see such a decision process as having a far greater symbolic benefit to the organization (through the ritualized enactment of a key organizational value) than functional benefit (by efficiently reaching a good decision).

At my own department level sometimes we get so hung up on these little points that we don't make decisions ...

Int: Is that damaging to your department?

It can be at times. It's frustrating because you want to get policy made and you leave and you go, "What did we just do for those two hours?"

Int: And the answer is?

Nothing ...

Int: How is it that the trivial concerns forestall making a decision that needs to be made? How come someone doesn't say, "That's trivial, let's move on?"

Because at my department level, everyone has a right to say whatever they want. And, no one has the right to say, "Let's move it on" ... It's a democracy. We make no decision, but we talked a lot about it.

Int: So it's taboo for someone to say, "Don't you think that's kind of small?"

Yeah. That would not be respecting your colleague.

While this passage describes a sort of rigorous egalitarianism fostering delay subroutines, other informants saw the enactment of collegiality as a gloss over power. A newly-tenured faculty in the sciences described an example of this delay subroutine in his/her department, concerning a curriculum issue. Since collegiality was enacted as consensus, a pressing decision on course content could be stalled until all faculty members agreed.

We have, let's say, three or four faculty members who primarily teach A[natomy] and P[hysiology]. And even though we follow the same basic curriculum as far as syllabi and objectives go, obviously everybody has the latitude to interject their own material ... And so we'll encounter situations where we're working on objectives, and there'll be discussions as to whether we should cover a particular topic. Three faculty members will say it absolutely needs to be in, and one faculty member will say, "I don't see that it needs to be there," or "I don't have the time to get to this." Or, "I won't be able to cover it."

So now the problem is that you're trying to reach some level of consistency, because people [i.e., students] are moving on to the nursing program. And so, in the lab, for instance, where our [teaching] assistants have to teach an agreed-upon curriculum for all the faculty, they're working off what are called lab lists, the anatomy that the students need to know. If we can't get all four faculty members who teach anatomy to agree on what needs to be on that lab list, those guys can't teach it. So the problem is that there are times when we want something to be on there, and there may be a person who doesn't want it to be, sometimes for nostalgic reasons. That blocks that decision.

Int: And then you just can't move forward with it?

And that can be very frustrating, and it doesn't go anywhere from there. The [teaching] assistants can be frustrated because three people are telling them yes, it needs to be there, the fourth person is not. It's very difficult to get all those people in a room at one point, so we have yearly meetings to try to do just that, and my strategy, my approach now has been to float some of these things out there and let them sit for six or eight months until they become someone else's idea. And what often-times happens, then, is that what may generate opposition from one or two individuals early on, as they've had the chance to ruminate over it, think about it for a while – you often see a very different response a few months later.

Yet another situation that can occur is that, for a variety of reasons, people join a decision process after it has begun. One informant described the problem this can create for the group leader, when the latecomers reopen issues that the group has already resolved. The leader must then strike a balance between conflicting imperatives: the need to affirm the inclusiveness of group (a core organizational value), and the need to avoid redundant discussions (a work subroutine).

Well, I think you don't like to embarrass people but often people come into various portions of a decision-making process and they're totally out of synch ... I mean, often what they do is they'll bring up something that has parts to it. Part of it was discussed six months ago and put to bed very, very fairly, but half of what they have to say might be interesting. It's like a new comment. And I think, again, the leadership has to decide what to do with that, and it has a lot to do with the person, the stake, the expertise they're bringing. It has to do, too, with where you are in the decision-making process. I see a lot of that in higher education institutions.

Representation and process losses

An important dimension of inclusion, mentioned by some informants, was that of representation. At the research site, this value meant that decision groups ought to physically include members of all groups with even a minor stake in the decision. A junior faculty member described an instance of an objection being raised to the legitimacy of a decision group on this basis.

We had a little problem with the structure of this committee that I'm on, and someone said, "Look this is not adequately representing the faculty across the board, therefore how you can make these decisions?" That's why we had a forty-five-person subcommittee to make sure that everybody was represented, and no one felt left out.

It would seem that a rigorous enactment of representation in a large organization is likely to create problems both in the functioning of a decision group, and in individuals' ability to participate in such groups. This informant described a problem of overload, and a related delay subroutine, in committees.

Int: What's your sense of the word "representative?" What does that word mean to you?

Probably the textbook definition is fair, accurate sampling of the group. Somebody from that division, from that department. The problem is that when you get so big, it becomes ineffective. And the minuscule and minor complaints surface, and that hinders the process.

According to this informant, an open-door policy had not fully satisfied this cultural value.

Int: Now, if the door was open for people to attend, and they didn't, why would there be a perception that people were excluded?

You know, somebody said that exact same thing to me as we left that meeting. "They're open meetings, anybody could come." I think the problem is that there are too many damn meetings on the campus. There's no time for everybody to be on a committee, there's this, there's that, there's the other thing.

In many ways, it appears that meetings can benefit an organization more as an enactment of inclusion and collegiality than as a practical method of making decisions. An administrator with considerable work experience in for-profit companies seemed puzzled that the organization would invest so much effort in meetings when the gain seemed primarily symbolic. Other informants shared this perception that oftentimes meetings became work subroutines in themselves, giving an appearance of activity but generating little useful output. As one put it succinctly, "It's like steering a car with no wheels."

Respecting all stakeholders, and an error subroutine

A senior faculty member in the humanities described an interesting problem in his/her department meetings. Another value current in academic environments is that policy decisions must equally protect the interests of all identifiable stakeholders, even while ignoring compelling differences in the relative weight of those interests. This informant related how that value often led a group to focus more on the outlying cases impacted by the policy than on the essential context of the decision. At the outset, this prolonged the deliberations. In the end, the group might be unsuccessful in finding a way to account for the exceptional cases, and create a workaround to the policy. Here, again, there are indications of work and error subroutines.

Like when the faculty get together in my department, we're affecting thousands of students, or we're affecting eighteen to twenty adjunct faculty, and what we're so afraid of doing is causing disruption in their lives. We want to look at it as closely as possible. Sometimes we get too narrow and we spend too much time on an issue that could affect maybe two or three students. At most.

The vision is that there's a great deal of desire to come up with the perfect decision. We want to come up with something that will not harm anyone,

and there is the desire to come up with the perfect decision. And what ends up happening is that you start to focus on the exceptions. And you don't look at – you spend an inordinate amount of time on it. It prolongs the decision-making process. Does it change it? I don't think so, most of the time. We will write, "There will be an exception to this policy. Here is how to change it."

Int: Besides delaying, does it ever lead to a bad decision?

Sometimes it leaves it too broad, too general. It becomes too encompassing and therefore has no meaning.

An administrator voiced a similar observation about a standing committee s/he served on. The committee had spent a great deal of time deliberating about the college's policy on smoking, and in the end adopted a recommendation which many, including this informant, felt would be ineffectual.

We have met on that issue [the policy on smoking], and that issue alone, for almost two years.

Int: So, what do you do?

We go there and discuss surveys and people's opinions, and make no decisions.

Int: Do you ever generate a recommendation?

I think we finally did.

Int: Finally?

I think we just made a recommendation, but it's so watered down. We try to water our recommendations down so much so that they make everyone happy, that they're no longer meaningful. I find quite often a meeting [here] is a meeting to compromise and make everybody happy. And you just can't make everybody happy. There's got to be some winners. There's got to be some losers. Here, we want everybody to be a winner. We all can't be winners. And it's not in the sense of winner and losing, it's just that sometimes your opinions mean something, sometimes they don't.

Student-centeredness, and a work subroutine

Another example of a UR linked to an organizational value surfaced in the interview with a newly-tenured faculty in the sciences. While this informant in no way denigrated the organizational value of student-centeredness, s/he made note of an elaborate work subroutine

(and, technically, an error subroutine) which had evolved around enacting that value. It seems likely that this routine will be familiar to most academicians.

If a student is unhappy about a particular grade, and wants to take a very unrealistic concern to the nth degree, they have the opportunity to do that because they're the student. A student who's got a 40 on everything that they've ever scored, who knows in writing that a passing average must be 65, being allowed to go from department chair to division chair to dean to a hearing, potentially. All of which is a tremendous waste of time, recognizing of course that the student needs to have a forum.

If they're being treated unfairly there needs to be a process in place. But at the same time, if it's clear that things have been handled entirely professionally, for the best interests of the student, there's no reason why just because the student is a student or a customer, that the student should be allowed to just continue to get away with something like that.

To this informant, the meticulous enactment of student-centeredness had also fostered an error subroutine in which the course grade may sometimes be an unreliable measure of a student's performance.

We'll have students ... who will come in and say, "Well, Doc, I've passed every other course I've ever taken here. I've got a 4.0. I can't understand why I'm just getting a B in anatomy," or "I'm just getting a B in organic chemistry. What is it that's happening now that's giving me this problem?" And so, these oftentimes are the students who want every advantage. They'll complain to the department chair or the division chair, "I don't understand why it's so difficult."

There's some level of, we're here to please the student, we're here to do what's best for the student, but the student is allowed to push that beyond what is realistic, beyond what is necessary, beyond what is in some cases professional. It encroaches on that student-professor relationship. And because that can happen across campus, the students have learned by habit that they can try these things, do some of these kinds of things. They may have learned that in high school and it's worked for them. They whine to their professor, their grade changes.

The problem of dominance and power relations in open meetings

While the college's governance system was designed to offer every organization member the opportunity to participate in

decision-making, and it did appear to be an important symbol of this organizational value, a surprising number of the informants saw problems in its routine functioning. Nunamaker *et al.* (1991, p. 49) noted that group process losses sometimes tended to rise as the group size increased, and it may be that the problems informants mentioned were simply endemic to a decision group which, at least in its charter if not the actual attendance at its meetings, was as large as the entire payroll of the organization.

A number of faculty informants indicated they did not always feel free to express their views candidly at meetings because of pressure, not from administrators, but from their peers. Here, again, is a paradox: although the meetings were clearly an important symbol of openness as an organizational value, some participants did not perceive them as safe places in which to speak. (This problem resembles the process losses Nunamaker *et al.* called *conformance pressure* and *domination* (1991, p. 46), and Dutton's analysis of how avowedly participatory online discussions can end up stifling participation (1996).)

A senior faculty member in the humanities described how a structure intended to promote open discussion actually inhibited it. It is worth noting that this informant had been tenured for a good number of years, yet still felt some degree of intimidation from his/her colleagues.

I've had a person in my department say something in [the general meeting of the college governance] that that person thought, and was called on the carpet afterwards by one of the more senior faculty.

Int: Wow.

Oh, yeah.

Int: So much for free speech, eh?

Oh, also on votes. "Why did you vote that way?"

Int: You're kidding!

Show of hand votes? [whistles]. So I usually sit behind the person who wants to watch me, I sit directly behind the person. So if they really want to watch me they have to turn all the way around – and they do.

Sadly, this informant saw no venue in which the participants could be free in sharing their perspectives about controversial issues.

And there is no forum to hear all the voices. There is no place because of the tenure structure, and the politics of the department, and everything else. There's no place to have that discussion that feels safe to people.

A junior faculty member in a different academic department also noted this degree of risk in expressing oneself in a public space.

I guess it's because I think people are – it's sort of like politicians are afraid often to cast votes even if their vote's in favor of something they believe in, because they may be afraid that those votes might be used against them in some way. I guess it's just the fear of going on the record about something.

This sentiment was not confined to the faculty ranks, nor was it based only on a fear of a specific reprisal. An administrator described a reluctance to risk a loss of face in the general meeting:

There's just so much resistance to change and the new people and the younger people. I mean, when I became the director of [names department], I was the youngest director here. And I was very intimidated to speak up, because you've got these big bullies who know what's going on, who'd be, "Looka here little miss, I've been here a lot longer than you and I can tell you that it's not going to work, what you're saying" ... Somebody really let me have it ... I never saw governance as a place that I can be honest.

While a number of informants described this problem in the governance meetings, it did not appear to be confined to that structure. The head of a large academic unit saw this process loss diminishing the effectiveness of its internal meetings:

One of the dynamics which I think is a very unfortunate one is that junior staff, junior people, can often feel their career is going to be affected and on the line if they cross a senior person who has tenure, might even be in a position to influence their career one way or the other ... so that there's a reluctance to sometimes come right out in the open with how you feel about something if that's going to cross somebody whose investment is in a different outcome. A very unfortunate dynamic.

A new faculty member in another department put it succinctly: "I'm not tenured. I don't want to rock the boat."

To state the problem concisely, if perhaps a bit cynically, the large decision groups often seem to benefit a complex organization more as ritualistic enactments of openness than they do as processes which generate gains in stimulation, synergy, or objective evaluation (Nunamaker *et al.*, 1991, p. 46) through actual freedom to openly share ideas. Given that such large groups consume considerable time and effort, they sometimes can better be understood as work and delay subroutines fostered by symbolic purposes than as collaborative decision-making.

Ideology and change resistance

At first glance it might seem that change resistance is rooted in whatever personal advantages or privileges the status quo confers. While localized benefits do appear to be one dimension of change resistance in URs, another dimension is the connection of current practices to underlying beliefs. This linkage of operational procedures to ideological tenets seems to create a powerful inertial force in an organization. The head of a large academic unit described the way even minor procedural change could be blocked in large group decision processes.

Well, I'm being pretty candid here because of confidentiality, but it's like if you – when you operationalize your beliefs, your principles of your profession into certain practices, the notion that the practices in place are immutable, and if you alter the practices in any way, even if you modernize them, to certain people you inherently and implicitly violate the beliefs.

That's not a true statement, a logical statement. So that any modernization or alteration in how you deliver your service, which might even be an enhancement of that service, automatically in some people's thinking, becomes a violation of the tenets and beliefs that underpin your profession or your service. And some folks will argue that line, which is just patently not true.

...

Any change has a suspect purpose to it, and it's all a grand scheme ... it's almost a suspicion rather than a comprehension that some of these things might be for everybody's benefit. Some are not, obviously. Not all change is good change. There's an inability to discriminate, and then to differentiate that you can change some things and still preserve the best of what you're doing and your basic principles.

A mid-level administrator likewise lamented that there were a number of institutional practices which had become, in his/her words, "big sacred things." In this informant's eyes, certain practices needed to be re-examined but open discussion was impossible. The organization thus might be capable of single-loop learning, but not double-loop learning.

A staff member described a work subroutine in a standing committee of the governance structure. This informant sat on the committee charged with resolving policy issues concerning educational standards. The work subroutine resulted when the specific questions referred to the committee became tied to the broad educational philosophy of the college, an area beyond the scope of the committee. This passage illustrates the way discussion of comparatively narrow operational or procedural issues can become linked to broad questions of institutional values and ideology, and thus become impossible to resolve even as their consideration uses up a great deal of time. While URs may become change resistant because subunits which are functionally related are only loosely coupled, URs may also result when subunits or issues which are functionally unrelated become tightly coupled.

Yes, I've been in meetings where we go over and over and over the same things and don't get anyplace. That was happening last year in educational standards, because everything that came back to us was educational philosophy. If we recommended a change, we were really talking about changing the philosophy, and we really thought we should discuss the philosophy before we made changes that changed [the philosophy] without knowing we changed it.

...

Because we were coming around to the philosophy thing and we're gonna say this is what our philosophy is, we cannot change, should not change A, B, C and D until we looked back at the philosophy. So, there was a lot of getting nowhere even though it was airing things.

A senior faculty member recounted a similar situation in faculty association meetings, but saw it instead as a positive feature of the discussion. In this informant's perspective, the delay in considering the scheduled agenda item is offset by the benefit of time spent discussing important philosophical issues. Perhaps this informant's view of that turn in a decision group reflects the high value faculty, with

their primary university role as educators and analysts, place on raising questions and defining issues.

Again, most of the meetings I go to are faculty association meetings. And at those meetings we discuss a number of policies – grading, [the new ICT], things like that. It often turns out that something like grading policy gets tied to a greater issue, like some more broad policy of how the faculty relates to the students, where the first issue is really a subset. Sometimes the original discussion needs to be postponed until the more broad issue has been resolved. That happens a lot in an open debate situation. Where there's a problem or a concern and someone raises it, this type of discussion really focuses or brings more clearly to mind, what the major issues really are.

A faculty member in the arts recalled his/her first impressions of department and division meetings at the college. This informant, like others, saw a connection between shared beliefs (or perhaps a nostalgia for the idealized past when beliefs were widely shared) and change resistance in the organization at that time.

[This has been] my seventh year here. And when I arrived, I was one of the few new people on this campus. Everybody else had been here for an eternity. And one of the things that I noticed was that in our department, we always ended up talking about the way things were rather than the way things could be ... Even within the division meetings, it was constantly, "Well, we've always done it this way. It's important for us to look at it this way. It's important to think about it this way." So, yes – I was very struck by the inflexibility of many people.

Int: Inflexibility?

[The belief that] it was very special, and it was the way it should be, and this is what makes us unique, and so why would we look at it differently?

Given the tight linkage of core beliefs and operational practices, this informant seemed a bit surprised that such a large policy change as the grading system could eventually occur, the work subroutine notwithstanding.

Again, I go back to the idea that in the past there was not that much room for change, and it was because of those core values. Even when we started talking about the grading change, we went into the idea of educational philosophy and that seemed to hold us up for quite a bit ... But we did change.

*Contradictions, opposing perspectives,
and ideological myths*

In some interviews there were indications that URs had evolved as ways for the organization to cope with contradictions in values. (These dynamics reflect Eisenberg's (1984) point that ambiguity in values or beliefs can sometimes benefit an organization.) A number of informants mentioned "student-centeredness" as an essential organizational value, but differed quite sharply in how that value ought to be enacted in the daily operation of the college, with some questioning whether this value was anything more than an ideological myth.

A junior faculty member in the arts seemed to be an especially keen observer of this aspect of the organizational dynamics. Perhaps, as a newcomer to the college, s/he had not yet fully acculturated to the organizational environment, so that any contradictions in the belief system were still identifiable, if not downright vivid. This informant noted a difference in the administrative perspective and faculty perspective on the nature of student-centeredness. The college had recently begun offering a small number of courses in a short, intensive semester. This informant expressed reservations about the educational benefit to the individual student of such courses, but noted that these courses had proven quite popular.

Is it best for the enrollment? Yeah. How can a three-week term be best for the student? All of that stuff is in your short-term memory ... You're gonna forget more than what you remember.

So, I'm not so sure that the decisions are in the best interests of the students. Or are they more in the best interests of FTE [full time enrollment], which is really the lifeblood? If you offer a course that's finished in three weeks, will you get people to take it? Absolutely.

...

What accountability for the people who leave? We should have a high accountability. Do we just cram in what is usually offered in fifteen weeks? I don't understand that. "Here's a chapter, read it. We're gonna talk about it tomorrow, we're gonna have a test about it on Wednesday, then we're gonna start the next one and have a test on Thursday." ... I don't see how it's beneficial in the long run to the students. It's beneficial to the institution, but not to the students.

An administrator also saw contradictions in core institutional beliefs and their enactment. The informant saw one particular belief

in particular as supporting change-resistant URs that imposed costs on students:

I think there is a core belief that [the research site] is somehow different than other places, and somehow better. And while I think [this] is an extraordinary place – I love being here, and I worked at [another college] for ten years ... I've got to tell you something. I didn't see any difference between the quality of the student coming out of [the other college] than I do the student coming out of [here].

This informant felt the belief in the organization's superiority preserved a number of work and error subroutines that imposed costs on students, despite the professed organizational value of student-centeredness. In this informant's description, when work or error subroutines in value chains involving students were called into question in the form of a comparison to corresponding practices at other educational institutions, the critique that the local practices were deficient (in the language of this study, were URs) was frequently rebutted by the professed belief in overall organizational superiority regarding student-centeredness. In essence, supporters of the status quo took a position along the line of "we're different because we're better." (As described in Chapter 8, this seems a clear case of an organizational-level drive to reduce cognitive dissonance.) An observer might expect that such a deeply held value as student-centeredness would generate considerable discussion in the general meetings. Yet, this informant felt there was something of a taboo against openly problematizing some work and error subroutines s/he saw violating that value.

Proposition Five

A cultural environment which places a high value on inclusion will tend to support double binds.

Inclusive decision-making and its discontents

As noted above, inclusion appeared to be one of the strongest organizational values at the research site, manifest as a tradition that major policy decisions and documents will be collective works. It is difficult to over-emphasize the strength of this value in the culture of this

organization, and it seems this is true of higher education in general. The co-chair of the college's most recent accreditation self-study summarized it concisely:

And if there was one thing you learned [here], that was where it all began and ended. When [the other co-chair of the self-study] and I did [the accreditation report] we had one goal, and that was to make sure that everyone was valued, included, affirmed.

However admirable this value may be in itself, it seemed to put leaders of decision groups in a double-bind situation. They must guide the group toward the efficient completion of its task, while simultaneously enacting the inclusion and collegiality values sufficiently to maintain the group's legitimacy within the organization's culture. The comment of a senior faculty member illustrated how high the expectation could be:

A good discussion leader steers the discussion back on track. So, if you're having a discussion about, say, something like setting a policy or making a rule or something like that, if the discussion starts to wander away from the central issue and gets sidetracked on a little detail – or maybe really off on a tangent – that discussion leader has to drag the discussion back, and has to know how to do it so that nobody feels like they've been tossed out on their ear.

Int: That would seem to me to be a difficult task.

Maybe. But that's what committee chairs are supposed to do. That's their job, and if they can't do it they shouldn't be committee chairs. It's as simple as that.

Informants often identified the college governance as the place where they had seen UR scripts played out. Governance occupied a special niche in the belief system of the organization because it was the structure through which all organization members could participate in collaborative policy decisions. Decisions made in governance were, by its charter, advisory to but not binding on the executive management of the college. Still, organization members expected college executives to take the recommendations adopted in governance very seriously.

Inclusiveness was a key feature of the governance structure. Standing committees within governance had specified quotas of members from the various constituencies of the college (i.e., faculty, staff,

administration, and students) so as to guarantee representation on them. Moreover, all members of the organization, including students, were invited to participate in monthly college-wide meetings called governance forums. The large group meetings were open to all who chose to attend, and a good deal of time was devoted to open discussion of policy issues before votes were taken on them. In sum, it would seem fair to view this collegial decision mechanism as an almost idealized enactment of the strong organizational value of inclusion.

Why was it, then, that so many organization members considered its actual workings as problematic, in one way or another? A senior faculty member pointed to a process loss related to group size (similar, but not identical, to the loss Nunamaker *et al.* identified as *air time fragmentation* (1991, p. 46)) and hinted at the difficulty the group leader might face in trying to avoid it:

Well first of all, the more people you have the more agendas you have of people, and the more people want to talk, and not necessarily discuss what is the central issue or even the issue that is at hand, or anything that's relevant. So I mean, you have to expect that people want to talk and you have to let them talk. You can't be autocratic about it. But sometimes that discussion veers off to something else that someone may raise. They'll say, "What about this? We didn't consider that." And are those germane to really what decision has to be made, or even what the problem is?

A junior faculty member observed a delay subroutine in a standing committee of the college governance:

And given that it was a detailed project that involved probably twenty to twenty-five committee members, it often happened that in the course of trying to reach that detailed document someone would raise an issue or make a point that was within his or her own area but which wasn't in anybody else's. And so it seemed that we would spend a lot of time giving that person a chance to air their idea or their question or their problem in ways that struck, I think, a lot of people as being kind of off the point of the larger goal that we were trying to reach. I think that happens with some regularity at the college.

But a delay subroutine may not be simply the unfortunate byproduct of an institutional value (in this case, a simple process loss related to group size). It is also possible that a long, drawn-out discussion may

be in some parties' strategic interest in a controversy. As Proposition Three suggests, a UR may persist because it does benefit certain actors. A junior faculty member raised the possibility that the inclusion value sometimes was used, via a delay subroutine, to prevent change and maintain the status quo:

And I also think that there are frankly some people interested in keeping the process going for as long as possible because that means it will never get changed and they don't want the grading system to change. I'm not thinking of anybody here specifically, but I know that that attitude exists in the college community and so the longer this debate goes on without a resolution the happier they are.

Int: So you're saying that it may be that for some people talking, and talking, and talking about it is a strategic maneuver.

It's a strategic maneuver to avoid resolution.

Another informant, a senior faculty member who had become a full-time administrator, described a work subroutine that could arise around representation as the enactment of inclusion:

Everyone wants to be able to give their two cents on an issue, on the question before it moves anywhere – and that usually has to do with who's been involved, who's had an opportunity. One of the objections, for example, to the committee that was going to look at [educational] practices was that it was a voluntary thing, "Who wants to do this?" A lot of people volunteered. There were some areas where no one volunteered.

So the issue now became around should there be equal representation on it? It's voluntary, anyone who wants to, can. "Oh, but some people didn't, and they will be left out, and shouldn't they be involved? And shouldn't we give them another opportunity?" And after a while your eyes glass over and you say, look, you give them the opportunity, they don't want to do it, tough. If it doesn't come out to their liking, that's it. Again, the guardian of total involvement.

This informant clearly was vexed by delay subroutines created as the college's inclusion value was enacted in the college-wide governance. While s/he appeared willing to trade off a certain degree of inclusion for relief from the process loss its rigorous enactment generated, that remedy would open the group up to criticism from others who would rather trade off the delay in moving the decision along for the sake of maximizing inclusion or openness.

The problem of leadership in an inclusive organization

This tension between the need for efficiency in group decision-making and the need to satisfactorily enact this fundamental organizational value posed a challenge for group leaders. A number of informants, when asked about problems in group processes, faulted the leaders of those groups for the work or delay subroutines in those processes. Other informants, however, complained that college administration dictated policy and failed to adequately involve faculty in decisions. Perhaps it is ironic that the commonly used phrase, “strong leadership,” can simultaneously have such different meanings, and that inclusion can foster blame subroutines.

The comments of a junior faculty member on a recent revision of the policy concerning incomplete grades offer some insights into this culturally-induced double bind. It is interesting to note that the informant seemed aware of the conflicting expectations.

And that’s when you get in a situation, again, a catch-22. You need strong leadership, but you need strong leadership that is open to suggestions. The vice president has written a policy on incomplete [grades]. That wasn’t given to any committee, it didn’t go through [the governance] steering committee, but [s/he] wrote it. [S/he] went around to other colleges, got their language, used part of our [existing policy’s] language, wrote it, and said, “Here it is!” That’s strong leadership.

But, what it shouldn’t be is, “Here it is, here’s the policy.” Rather it should be, “Here it is, let’s talk about it.” We’ll spend a day – one day, that’s it – talking about it. You go back, consider it, next time we’ll meet we’ll have a discussion. We’ll vote or come up with alternative plans. That’s part of the process, it’s not, “Duck! Here comes the next policy.”

But again you’ve got to have something there, and it sounds like I’m contradicting myself, but you need to have somebody saying, “I’m in charge, this is the way it’s going to be.” But not sitting up there as the benevolent dictator saying, “Here is the new policy. Adopt it!” Let’s have a discussion about the policy. And I don’t know if that’s happened.

A senior faculty member in the humanities was quite blunt about his/her perception that the group decision process in the governance meetings was often no more than a gloss over the exercise of executive power:

I don't think that the upper-level administration is frank and honest. Decisions are made and we're made to think that our input has influence in making those decisions. There are times when we're misled. The grading change was an example. I was told before the conversation became public that the grading system was going to change. And that it was a done deal.

Int: Told by whom?

By an upper-level administrator.

By no means was the discontent with collective decision processes universal among this study's informants, however. The head of a large department within educational services spoke very positively about both governance and other collegial processes. It is interesting to note that this informant saw the discontent as rooted in a fundamental disagreement about the appropriate role of these collective processes in policy formation. This informant saw the collective process as advisory to the college executives, and was satisfied that those executives seriously considered that input. Others, in the view of this informant, expected the collective process to culminate in a referendum, with the majority vote binding on the executives.

A senior faculty member in the sciences saw the organizational context as requiring a kind of ritualistic behavior by all parties for the sake of enacting the institutional value of inclusiveness – albeit at the cost of generating work subroutines:

I don't think [the college president] lies and I certainly would never accuse [the academic vice-president] of doing that ... But again when [the president] responded yes to Prof. L, that we would not change the grading system if the faculty votes no, I didn't believe [it]. They spent a lot of money on installing [the new ICT] on the basis of the grading system and other things that would go along with that, and it was clear that it was going to be implemented.

I was on the committee [which reviewed the grading policy] the previous summer and it was pretty clear that no matter what we came up with the school was going to do what it wanted to do anyway. One could say that was lying and misleading. I would like to think that [the president] was engaging the faculty, and that's very generous. But [s/he] had to do something and that was the way of doing it. My experience is that I was wasting my time but somebody had to be on the committee.

So, when you say lie, there are techniques one needs to use when one is a leader and if the troops are politically sensitive or experienced, they will

Table 5.2 *Examples of subroutines in the case*

Subroutine	Example from the case
Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elaborate grade appeals • elaborate system planning documents, subsequently ignored • extensive face-to-face meetings • formation of additional subcommittees • group editing of paper forms • group lacking appropriate decision power • incompatibilities in formats of shared data • need to validate the representativeness of committee • policy review requiring reexamination of core values • procurement paperwork and interdepartmental handoffs • student testing during admissions process • unproductive meetings as symbols of inclusion
Delay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consensus required for department's curriculum revision • continuing to add representatives to decision group • deliberate diversion from meeting agenda • extensive discussion, from everyone, as enactment of collegiality • inclusion, and personal agendas • indecision in transferring data to new system • miscommunication between users and tech support • non-responsiveness to messages • prolonged discussion of issue as a tactic to forestall decision • revision of general education policy • revision of grading policy • slow response to demand for courses
Error	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bad fit of course availability to demand • belief in institutional uniqueness precluding change

Table 5.2 (cont.)

Subroutine	Example from the case
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dominance in open meetings • idiosyncratic general education policy • inefficient distribution of computing machinery • late registration of international students • poor linkage of course sections to number of full-time faculty • miscommunication between users and tech support • missed deadlines for payroll information • overweighting exceptional cases in policy decisions • permanent linkage of current practices to core values, “sacred cows” • attempting to please all stakeholders
Blame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agenda-driven meetings seen as managerial control • claims that information was not shared • conflict between operations and academic units • executive decisions seen as illegitimate power • group decision process seen as gloss on executive power • late reporting of grades • scapegoating mainframe computing department and tech support

recognize that this is a charade and what is going to happen is going to happen despite the input. But this is a very reasonable way to make everyone feel good to have their input, keeps the waters smooth and the interaction open and friendly. Therefore it's acceptable to people.

In short, this informant believed the relational benefit of the process (through engaging organization members) outweighed its cost (in generating a work subroutine). Further, the informant viewed the college president's actions in a double-bind situation as evidence of leadership skill, rather than ethical deficiency.

Conclusion

Table 5.2 summarizes examples of the primary URs identified in the fieldwork of the case. The table should not be understood as a measurement of the communication climate of the research site, or as critique of interactions at the site. For us, perhaps the biggest discovery from this field study was the intimate connection between organizational culture and unusual routines, with their associated interaction scripts. The next chapter will show how we incorporated these elements into a revised model.